ALLES MEMORIES

GEORGE PETERS

The White Chief basin happy excursions over a number of years forever lingers in our memoirs and dreams. Ha, I laugh at this moment reflecting on one day when my son and I took one of Grace Alles's grandson for a day hike up to the high lake just above the White Chief mine - as he struggled to keep up with our pace, he was so apologetic for being so slow and having to sit down on almost every large boulder. His brand new pair of jeans were without a backside from wear and he was so worried about how Grace and the Alles family might scold him. No to worry after the splendid pan sized trout feast on the shoreline of that small alpine lake where we found plenty of fishline, hooks and even bait to catch the fish . Once back to Grace's little cabin, she had a heartiest of laughs when she saw the back of his new jeans.

It seemed we camped through so many summer weekends and vacations primarily at Atwell Mill, the wonderful folks in Silver City Cabins took us under their wings with pleas to get a cabin of our own. We became somewhat natives of the area and participated in a lot of the seasons' openings and closings picnics, parties and Sundays' church services. Whenever Grace Alles was up to it we would bring her along with us unless other friends or family members brought her.

When we first began going to MK we camped at the upper MK Valley campsites to gradually also have a lot of new friends there. Many were either the old original cabin owners or second and third generation family members also took us into their friendships. I preferred the camping and eventually small RV's to a cabin so we would not have to worry about a cabin through the off seasons. My family and I ranged over many of the back country trails, Mosquito Lakes, Hockett Meadow.

Opening day was always marching from Atwell Campground to Graces place to commence getting it ready for her arrival for the summer. Sometimes members of her family would be there to help and we would open the cabin to hang out all the quilts, blankets and rugs in the sun. Each summer I also would care for the remnants of the old mill's steam engine to apply fresh coats of preservative oil and check to ascertain how much it was sinking into the ground. Maybe every four or five years we would clean out the old privy!

There was an old Servel Propane gas refrigerator which never worked and finally put on the little outside porch full of all kinds of STUFF. Next to it in the shade was an old fashioned ice box which usually received blocks of ice or trays of ice cubes brought up by friends for Grace. It plinked droplets of melted water into a dish pan under the porch (for birds, bunnies, chipmunks , other varmints an d possibly passing ghosts from days of yore.

There was always an old, beat up wooden rocking chair which was Aunt Grace's "throne" on chilly evenings inside next to the ancient huge BLACK wood stove. Each side were boxes for newspapers and magazines while the other side's contained fabric tatters to hand braid and become gorgeous, collector's item rag rugs for Grace's family and closest friends. On the old stove or hanging beside it was always a popcorn popper (wire). Many times a large bowl of freshly popped popcorn sat waiting for after some rounds of Chinese Checkers or card games.

Many little boy's and girl's "treasures" filled the porch

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and insides of the cabin; be they old horse shoes found in the meadow or wild flowers. My she was proud of my two kids finding some old fragments of her childhood's family chinaware during an "archeological dig" just above her old home which was taken over by the Forest Service for their Ranger. Pans of old fashioned fudge seemed always there as special goodies for the kids and parents.

Sometimes, some ancient radio could pick up programs of interest for Grace and visitors... it would generally be turned off for live banter between the gracious, old hostess and passerby's was always more interesting.

Every nook and cranny including underneath her sagging metal bed was filled to the hilts with something loved and treasured. Dust included ! Now and then visitors would take up a broom to sort of shift dust, etc to the outside depending upon Grace's condescendence of the moment. Old timers always asked first ! Her little cabin was a veritable archival treasure house.

In closing, there were always two or three freshly laundered lovely, handmade aprons adorning the back of a door. She would doff a somewhat used, spilled upon one she wore to quickly put on a clean one before opening the door or the well worn screen door. Most doors always needed to be adjusted a bit to open a bit more freely --- the cabin structure seemed to be in a constant state of somewhat shifting a bit. Some of us would have to make emergency adjustments even following out door church services at the Silver City Store area and delivering Grace back to her little cabin. The Lord chuckled from above.

Visit almost any flea market and you will have a fine collection of so many similar treasures like Aunt Grace's minus the stories associated with each. Each speck of dust, grain of sand, piece of mud and woodchip has a part of Grace Alles ever present with those fortunate to know her in their lifetimes. I am sure any docent(s) automatically slip into her spirit when present in the old cabin. Maybe in years ahead campfire, homespun reenactments of "The Atwell Mill" in the meadow there will draw folks from near and far.

True MK happening: One year we were able to make it up to MK's Atwell Mill Campground in spite of the final leg involving about a foot of snow on the road in quite a few places. There, next to our favorite campsite, was a rustic lean to occupied my an elderly chap who truly looked like something from a Hollywood production of a famed Mountain Man . The wife and I bunked out in our large Dodge van. We quietly climbed into our sleeping bags before the outside chill robbed the warmth inside, In the morning, we invited our neighbor for a "getting to know you", warm breakfast. Listening to his winter experience, I asked if he had any bears into the campgrounds. He was a very wise, experienced guy and said, " Of course, I had bears, but I kept my meager supplies safely stowed away inside one of the hollowed out Redwood trunks behind front and back piles of rocks and anything which would make a noise to scare them away. Some stuff I hung from trees. "We became close friends for over a half dozen camping years at Atwell Mill.

It gradually came out that he went up there to die or get well as the doctors and VA Hospital certainly were not accomplishing much to help him. Well, the supreme healing outdoors did it along with his convening with a hosts of CCC ghosts. He was the CCC's (Civilian Conservation Corps) mascot as an orphan during the late thirties. How he delighted in taking us to the ruins of the old CC buildings just above Atwell Mill campground.

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When I last took a nostalgic walk to the site, there was practically nothing left to show. For a time the site was sort of a hardware store for nails, pieces of pipe, etc - free for the taking. Quite a few pieces found their ways to race's old little cabin.

The old codger brought his best friend up there to Atwell Mill Campground for healing very serious infections of both legs sustained from concrete pouring into his rubber high boots. Took a couple summers and before he was also OK
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I wish could remember their names. They would certainly be on some of Aunt Grace Alles's "Sign In Boards". Or, maybe I can wrestle up the two old Three Rivers codgers (obviously must have been boyhood friends) who annually went up to their trailside camp with their pack horses and mules loaded to the hilt. Maybe quite a bit was liquid "refreshments". One of them cussed a blue streak as he staggered up the roadway past the campgrounds. The other very distinguished fellow usually sat on a fine steed.

I used to race down to Grace Alles's place to try to shush the guy up as we had so many women and children in the Atwell Mill Campground. Once about a half mile further past us, you could hear him burst out with language only a bosun would use.

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